FRANK FRAZETTA'S

# DARK KINGDOM™

$3.99 US
PART 2
COVER A

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FRANK FRAZETTA'S

# DARK KINGDOM

PART 2

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# WELOME TO THE DARK KINGDOM

Among the grim sagas of the barbaric sea-faring race of icy, far-flung ***Vikavia***, no legend stood grimmer or bloodier than the tale of ***RED MORDEN***, the ***CRIMSON REAVER***.

The tale told of his family's death by the fangs and claws of a venemous dragon-beast that had nested above their village. Morden, called home from the raiding season on the ***BRUMAL SEA*** by a final, desperate message from his doomed, mystic wife ***BRYNNA***, found his homeland in a ragged shambles, his people slain and his four children missing.

Blinded by the ***RED RAGE*** and deserted by his cowardly crewmen, Morden climbed the sheer crags of the ***DRAGONSPYNES*** alone. With the aid of his fallen, psychic wife, he overcame his lifelong fear of close, dark spaces and entered the monster's lair. In the shadowed nest, he found the dragon's monstrous offspring among the bones of his own children. His new sight went red and when his axe had finished its work...the screeching spawn were dead. The nest was not quiet for long.

With axe and bow, Morden battled the hell-spawned creature, overcoming its savagery only by his wits. Severing the beast's poisoned tail, he slew the dragon with its own venom. Together, the two combatants plunged from the icy heights into the sea.

Rescued by the whim of the sea god ***NYROR***, Morden took to the seas once more, pitting his axe, courage and vengeful fury against the darkness beyond the waves to chase the whispered legend of a talisman that could breath life into his lost BRYNNA once more...

# CHAPTER 2: WITCH LIGHTS

Cold blue sunshine washed the thawing earth below, hastening the snowmelt and slowly warming the small, coastal village. Resting on a low, sloping rise above a broad beach, the village looked out on the iron-gray expanse of the ***Brumal*** sea that stretched beyond the spits of sand and weathered timbers of long, stout piers like a roiling plane of living steel. Thick doors groaned open on rusted hinges and the sound of flint scraping steel rang in the air as the village stirred. Throughout the small community, sturdy women raised thankful smiles to the sparse heat and gray light from the morning sky as the salt wind lifted their braided hair. At their sides, tall men with lusty beards grinned with pride at the bobbing fleet of dragon-prowed ships lashed firmly to thick pilings amongst floating plates of dying ice.

Spring had come to ***Vikavia*** and once again, the coat of cruel winter was shed from the shoulders of the world.

***Finn*** raced along the muddy paths that led through the village. He smiled at the heat on his shoulders, acknowledging the coming of warmer months and looking forward anxiously to his own fourteenth summer. He ran past lean, barking dogs, splashing mindlessly through deep puddles and ignoring the shouts from startled women as they leaped from his path to avoid being specked with mud. Finn had no time for prattling females today. Today, by his mother's promise, he was allowed to visit his grandfather and his grandfather had stories to tell.

There was no time to waste.

Finn vaulted the low fence surrounding his grandfather's hut and landed with a splash in the goat-yard. A frightened, bleating nanny and her kids kicked up mud and raced for calmer surroundings as he hurtled past, hand already reaching for the door latch. Before his trembling fingers could grasp the wooden lever, the door swung open from inside and Finn had to grip the portal's edge to keep from slamming into the tall, thin figure filling the threshold.

"FINN ULGRIDD!" his mother growled in annoyed surprise, "HAVE HELL'S DEVILS TAKEN YOU, BOY?"

"MOTHER!" Finn replied, breathless and equally shocked.

"AYE," she said, brow furrowing. "A MOTHER WHO HAS PERHAPS OVER-ESTIMATED THE GRACES OF HER ELDEST. PERHAPS YOU SHOULD BE MADE TO WAIT A WHILE LONGER BEFORE BOTHERING YOUR AILING GRAND-SIRE."

"I'M SORRY, MOTHER! I WAS JUST..."
"I CAN SEE THAT YOU ARE," she replied, shifting the wicker basket clutched in her arms to a spot on her left hip and fixing him with a punishing, disappointed stare. "I IMAGINE YOU'LL BE EVEN SORRIER WHEN YOU JOIN ME AT THE CAULDRON TO BOIL THESE RAGS AND..."
"LET THE BOY BE, ILGA! HE'S MERELY ANXIOUS!"

The gruff voice boomed from inside the hut and Finn ducked, staring under his mother's arm toward the squat building's far wall. In the spare light from the flickering fireplace, he could see the fur-covered form of his grandfather, lying beneath a thick pile of pelts in his great bed. The old man's bald head shone in the firelight and his sprawling, ice-white beard spread over his chest. Ghurrd wore a broad smile and his left eye winked at his grandson as his big hands beckoned Finn forward.

Needing no further inspiration, Finn ducked under his mother's arm and dodged into the hut. He raced to his grandfather's side and stood close to the old man, peering out at his mother with a hopeful gaze. ***Ilga*** turned in the doorway, fighting a smile as she attempted to look at the two of them sternly.

"YOU'LL BE THE RUIN OF THE BOY, FATHER GHURRD."

"'TIS MY ROLE AS HIS GRANDFATHER, ILGA. WHILE YOU MUST OFTEN PLAY THE ENEMY, IT IS MY PLEASURE TO FOREVER BE THE ALLY!" the aged warrior responded, grinning wider.

"HUMPH!" Ilga replied, turning with a whip of blonde braids and closing the door as she exited. "YOU TWO DESERVE EACH OTHER."

The heavy door closed with a thud, barring the sunlight from the hut's interior and bringing its walls and ceiling closer in the claustrophobic glow of the fire. Ghurrd reached out a gnarled hand and tousled Finn's hair, opening his lips in a full smile that showed teeth and smoothed the wrinkles around his mouth.

"HA! FINN! YOU'VE COME AT LAST!" the old man said joyfully.

"I WANTED TO COME WEEKS AGO, BUT MOTHER..." Finn replied, frowning.

"I KNOW THAT, BOY. I'VE BEEN AT HER ALL WINTER TO BRING YOU 'ROUND. SHE'S A HARD ONE, YOUR MOTHER, BUT SHE'S A GOOD WOMAN AND YOU'D BE WISE TO MIND HER. SHE'S CARRIED MY SON AND GRANDSON THROUGH MANY A HARSH SEASON, EH?"

"I GUESS..." Finn answered, trailing off and moving his head to stare at the bandaged foot resting atop a pile of flaxen pillows at the foot of the bed. "DOES IT HURT MUCH?"

"THE GOUT?" Ghurrd responded, moving his own head to follow the boy's stare. "WELL, LESS THAN A SWORD TO THE GUTS, BUT MORE THAN A POKE TO THE EYE. LET'S SAY IT'S BOTHERSOME. ALMOST AS BOTHERSOME AS LYING ABED THIS WHOLE ICE SEASON. BUT HERE NOW, YOU'VE NOT COME AFTER ALL THESE WEEKS TO HEAR ME MOAN ABOUT MY FOOT, HAVE YOU?"

"NO!" Finn breathed excitedly. "I CAME BECAUSE YOU PROMISED TO TELL ME MORE OF..."

"AH, YES..." Ghurrd interrupted, settling his head back into the furs surrounding his shoulders. "I REMEMBER MY PROMISE, GRANDSON. I'LL KEEP YOU WAITING NO LONGER, BUT I'LL WARN YOU AGAIN...NOT A WORD TO YOUR MOTHER AND FATHER, EH?"

"I PROMISE!" Finn gushed, pulling a low stool from the fireside. He slid the wooden chair close to his grandfather's bed and rested his elbows on the furs. His mouth closed instantly and his eyes fixed on the old man's face as Ghurrd began to speak.

The old Vikavian's chin sank into his beard and he lowered his bushy brows to stare at Finn from the shadowed wells of his cheeks. His voice was low and filled with the promise of hushed, forbidden legend. "THEN LISTEN CLOSE, BOY...AND I'LL TELL YOU MORE OF THE SAGA OF RED MORDEN!"

'Twas riding the white-capped fists of ***Nyror's*** realm that we left the Red Reaver, eh boy? Yes, that's it. Morden stood alone, boots squared on the frozen deck of his small craft, left hand snarled in the rigging and his right filled with the length of a vicious harpoon as the frozen Brumal pitched and bucked beneath him. And to starboard, the sea had spat up one of its darkest horrors. One of the Lost Ones, a long-drowned sailor transformed by Nyror's own webbed hand into a beast of scale, fin and fang, doomed to haunt the spiked reefs we call the ***Fangs of Dyrgge***.

The beast stood from the raging waters at three times the size of Morden's boat, raking the storm winds with its claws, lashing the waves with its tail and roaring its rage at the man before it from behind rows of razored fangs. Morden's blood ran thick with the chill of terror and he grasped the ice-rimed ropes to maintain his balance lest he be thrown from the deck. The small boat climbed to the peak of a swell, leveling for the merest of seconds and seeing his opportunity; Morden shook off the clutch of fear. He squared his shoulders, roared back at the coiling thing before him and launched the harpoon with all the strength of his right arm.

The sea devil had reared back, preparing to lunge forward and dash Morden's boat into splinters when the wedge-shaped blade took it in the chest. The throw had been true and the lance plunged deep into the scaly flesh, raising gouts of green blood from the wound and a deafening roar of pain from the hideous beast's throat. Writhing, the Lost One tore the offending barb from its flesh, bringing more blood as it thrashed the water anew with its serpentine tail. Casting the harpoon away, the monster roared once more and then dove, disappearing into the depths with a massive splash.

Morden clung to the boat's single mast, breathing heavily and shaking ice from his beard and brow. Fresh sweat froze instantly on his skin and he worked the taut muscles beneath to keep his blood hot. He reached for the shaft of his battle-axe and pulled it from its place on the gunwale, bringing it to bear in his freed right hand as he cautiously scanned the waves for sign of the creature's return. He didn't wait long.

The beast roared from the angry sea, jaws wide, filling the night with the wail of a hungry, tormented soul as it clamped its claws on the bow of the tiny boat. It shoved the prow beneath the waves, threatening to swamp the craft as it climbed the rising deck toward its prey. Morden, sliding toward the ravenous creature on the inclined deck, had risen into the night winds along with the stern. He clutched madly at the frozen rigging ropes, pulling with all his might to keep his feet and avoid those snapping jaws. The beast climbed further, moving its scaled left arm forward and clamping it to one of the slats spanning the boat's deck. Morden could feel its hot breath, smell the fish-stink from deep in its belly...and he could read his own doom in the monster's bulging eyes. He raised the axe, preparing to sell his life dearly with a final, desperate blow, when the rigging lines in his left hand snapped and uncoiled. With a shout, he slid toward the gnashing wall of dripping teeth, trailing a coil of unanchored rope.

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"WHAT DID HE DO, GRANDFATHER!?" Finn asked, breathless.
"WHAT DID HE DO?" Ghurrd replied, eyes wide, hands raised to claws in the air. "HE DID WHAT VIKAVIANS ARE BORN TO DO, BOY! HE LOOKED GRIM DEATH STRAIGHT IN ITS GRINNING, BONY FACE AND SPAT IN ITS TEETH!"

Morden twisted his body, falling to his right to avoid the snapping fangs of the ***Lost One*** as he slid past it to the boat's rail. He landed with a brutal crash, bruising his shoulders and avoiding the oblivion of concussion only by the grace of his famous winged helm. The monster roared in stoked rage at the loss of its cornered morsel and turned, raising its claw on the left side. Morden did not hesitate. He hurled the rope with his left hand, whipping it about the scaly neck and stamping a boot to trap the loose end as he rose from the pitched deck.

The sea creature's claw raked his shoulder, drawing a dripping red line across the Reaver's flesh as he ducked its swipe. With a cry of desperate rage, Morden drew the rope tight, pulling the beast's snapping head downward, toward the point where he'd anchored it with his foot. The instant the thing's chin hit the deck, Morden's axe rose high into the night. Lightning flashed in the iron canopy above, sending a bead of white light along the weapon's honed edge as it reached the apex of his swing. The light rode the blade in its murderous downward arc, losing its gleam only when the forward head buried itself in the monster's neck.

The Lost One roared again. This time, its voice spoke not only of pain...but also of fear. Beside it on the deck, the man it had hoped to devour had transformed into a moving wraith of blood-splashed rage. Morden freed the axe, raising it again and again, chopping and hacking at the monster's neck in a savage rain of mortal attacks. The Lost One writhed and squirmed, unable to free itself from the pinning noose, growing weaker and weaker with each fall of the blade. It raised its hands, splaying webbed claws as it attempted to bring a fresh cry from its ruined throat. The sound it managed was no more than a squeal as Morden brought his savage axe down for the final time.

The weapon's steel edge found the wood of the deck and the beastly head separated from the spurting stump of its neck. The severed head rolled, coming to rest, face-up, next to the mast. The twitching, spurting body slid backwards, sliding over the rising bow of the boat and leaving a trail of fast freezing green gore, disappeared beneath the waves.

Morden leaned against the boat's rail, sucking air into his tormented lungs in great, heaving gulps. His body shook and the axe shaft fell from his trembling hand as waves of red rage washed from him. He lowered his gaze, frowning grimly at the calf-deep water that lapped at his boot tops. With a sigh, he raised his arms and removed his feathered helm. Shaking his head to clear it and to shed the sheath of ice that clung to his scarlet hair, the Reaver bent low, scooped the invading sea into his helmet and began to bail.

"WHAT NEXT, GRANDFATHER?"

"HA! WHAT NEXT...?" Ghurrd answered, wiping sweat from his brow and settling back into his furs. The tale had excited the old man and he had risen from his sick bed in the telling.

"NEXT, RED MORDEN FACED ONE OF THE GREATEST ENEMIES A MAN CAN FACE ON THE GREAT BRUMAL SEA."

"WHAT ENEMY COULD BE GREATER THAN THE LOST ONES?" Finn gasped.

"TIME, YOUNG FINN." Ghurrd answered lowering his eyelids knowingly and raising a finger to point at the boy in the firelight. "NOTHING MORE THAN TIME."

Adrift for weeks on the Brumal, Morden's boat followed the whim of the currents. The broken mast, with its shredded sail and ruined rigging, offered no chance at controlled propulsion or direction. The wooden rudder banged side to side uselessly on its swivel in the stern.

With only a series of carved notches in the rail before him and the dwindling stores of food and fresh water in leather pouch and wineskin between his feet to mark the passage of days, Morden had resigned himself to the fact that he was floating, at the pleasure of the gods...toward his doom.

When morning found him carving the twentieth notch in the frozen wood of the rail, Morden replaced his dagger in its sheath and reached for his food pouch. His searching hand came forth with the final scrap of jerked, salted mutton and he frowned as he brought it to his mouth. The morsel was hardly a meal, but even rationing as he had been, it remained the only bit of food in the boat. He chewed slowly, draining every bit of juice from it in hopes of quieting the rumble in his belly. Finished, he raised the wine skin and pulled the cork. Nothing came from the spout and the dry rattle of ice greeted his ears. What precious little fresh water that remained had frozen solid. With a grunt, he tore the skin open with his dagger and fished the ice chips out with stiff fingers. He popped them into his mouth and sighed as they melted, quenching his thirst for the last time.

He tossed the useless pouch and skin overboard and settled back into his furs, dropping his gaze from the threatening sky and leveling it on the deck. From its frozen spot next to the mast, the severed head of the Lost One stared back at him with dead eyes. He closed his heavy lids against the macabre sight and shivering, tried to sleep.

When three more notches had been added to the boat's rail, Morden's reason began to follow his provisions. As the pale afternoon sun fought to overcome the gray clouds above him, he stared forth from the frozen folds of his brittle furs and fragments of ice broke and fell from his brows and beard as he spoke. His voice showed no surprise and he answered slowly through trembling lips. The questions rang in his mind, asked by a voice he'd never heard. A voice that seemed to come from the frozen head near the mast.

"WHY AM I HERE?" he mimicked aloud. His face wore a look of confusion as if the answer to the question should have been obvious. "I THINK YOU KNOW WHY I'M HERE."

Morden shifted beneath the shell of rigid fur, grunting with impatience as the question rang in his mind again. The severed head-his fellow conversationalist, stared on with glassy, frozen eyes. "ALL RIGHT, DAMN IT! SINCE I'VE

NOTHING BETTER TO DO...I'LL TELL YOU. MY WIFE...MY CHILDREN...ARE DEAD. MY FAMILY'S SHADES HAUNT NYROR'S HALLS AND IT SEEMS THAT THEY'VE TAKEN MY OWN SOUL ALONG WITH THEM."

"HOW, YOU ASK?" Morden responded, echoing the phantom voice in his head. "THEY WERE SLAUGHTERED, THEIR LIVES AND FLESH TORN FROM THEM BY A WINGED BEAST FROM HELL TO FEED ITS OWN YOUNG. THEY WERE MURDERED WHILE I WAS AWAY, SAILING THESE VERY CURSED SEAS! WHAT'S THAT? THE BEAST? AH, THAT DEVIL...LIKE A DRAGON IT WAS, WITH THE POISONED TAIL OF A GREAT WASP! FEARSOME. THE VERY THOUGHT OF THE DAMNED THING SENT JALLAK AND THE REST OF MY CREW RUNNING AWAY IN THEIR LONG SHIP! IMAGINE THAT...TWO-SCORE BRAVE VIKAVIANS, FLEEING LIKE WHIPPED BABES FROM A WHISPERED NIGHTMARE TOLD TO USHER CHILDREN TO THEIR COTS!"

"WELL, THOSE COWARDS BE DAMNED," Morden huffed, spitting on the deck. "I AM RED MORDEN AND I FEAR NO MONSTER! I FACED THE THING ALONE! I FOUGHT IT IN ITS LAIR, IN THE SKY...AYE; EVEN TO NYROR'S DEPTHS I CHASED THE BEAST! IT ROAMS THE PITS OF DAMNATION NOW- AND MAY ITS SOUL, IF IT HAS ONE...KNOW NO PEACE."

"NOW? NOW I SAIL IN SEARCH OF ANOTHER WHISPERED MYTH," Morden answered, raising his head to stare toward the empty horizon. "I'VE HEARD TALES...RUMORS OF A TALISMAN OF SORTS. A THING OF GREAT POWER, LOST FOR DECADES SOMEWHERE OUT THERE, 'CROSS THE SEA. IT IS SAID THAT THE THING HAS THE ABILITY TO RETURN LIFE TO THE DEAD."

"YES, DAMN YOU! I BELIEVE IT!" Morden shouted, eyes fixing on the silent head again, sudden hot anger pulsing in his eyes. "DO YOU THINK I'D BE HERE MUMBLING TO YOU, LOST ON THE WAVES IF I DIDN'T? IT'S OUT THERE...WAITING. I'LL FIND IT AND CARRY IT TO THE SNOWS OF THE HIGH PLAINS ABOVE MY VILLAGE AND I'LL BREATHE LIFE INTO MY WIFE ONCE MORE OR DIE AND BE DAMNED IN THE TRYING!"

Morden sat silently for a time, eyes closed against the cold wind, chin lowered to rest on his chest. He breathed heavily, calming emotions that rose unbidden from deep inside him. When he raised his head again, his eyes were like blue steel and the corners of his mouth curled with the hint of a rare smile. "BRYNNA," he said, answering the whispering voice in his head. "HER NAME WAS BRYNNA."

"I THOUGHT RED MORDEN ONLY SMILED WHEN HE WAS SLAYING ENEMIES WITH HIS AXE!"

"AH, YOUNG FINN, YOU'VE A LOT TO LEARN ABOUT BEING A MAN. IT SEEMS THIRTEEN SUMMERS HAVE LEFT YOU WANTING IN THE WAYS OF THE HEART." Ghurrd answered, smiling wryly.

"NEARLY FOURTEEN SUMMERS!" Finn shouted, his expression growing defensive and annoyed. "AND I'VE SMILED AT GIRLS! THEY'VE SMILED BACK, TOO!"

"EASY, GRANDSON. I MEANT NO DISRESPECT," Ghurrd laughed, raising his hands to calm the boy. "I'M MERELY SURPRISED AT YOU, SPEAKING OF RED MORDEN THIS WAY. YOU DISCOUNT THE LIFE THE MAN HAD LOST. DON'T YOU SEE THAT THE DEATH OF HIS FAMILY WAS WHAT BIRTHED THE GREATEST SAGA OF THE MAN? IT'S WHAT SET HIM ON HIS DANGEROUS COURSE, BOY. AH, WELL...PERHAPS YOU DON'T WANT TO HEAR THAT PART OF THE TALE."

"NO, GRANDFATHER, PLEASE...I WANT TO HEAR IT ALL." Finn pleaded, settling down again.

"VERY WELL THEN," Ghurrd answered, smiling wider. "THEN QUIET DOWN AND I'LL TELL YOU OF HOW MORDEN MET HIS FAIR BRYNNA."

As you know, when a boy of our clan reaches sixteen summers, he and his fellows are sent to the Proving Isle to become men. So it was with Morden. Before he was the famed Red Reaver, before he set foot on the deck of a dragon-prow, he was a boy. And he, along with a dozen others from the village of our people, were marooned on a rocky, desolate spit of land many leagues from home. Left there by their fathers, without so much as a dagger between them, they were expected to survive on their own for a month. If they managed this, the same ship would come for them and take them home. They would then be looked at as boys no longer, but as men!

Morden stood on that forbidding beach, red hair flowing, hands fisted at his sides as he watched the delivery ship disappear over the horizon. All around him, his fellows either wept at their predicament or scrambled about the sand with sticks, poking under rocks or wading in tide pools in search of shrimp or snails. Morden turned when the sails faded from his sight and fixed the others with a look of disgust. He marched past them angrily, leaving them to their crying and scrabbling and headed for the island's sparse tree line.

Within the first two days, Morden had managed to fashion himself a crude axe using a stout fallen limb, a flat rock he'd honed to an edge and thick creeper vines from the forest. With this rough instrument, he chopped and hacked at small trees, felling them. The other boys watched him in stark wonder, frightened by his resolve, but thrilled at his actions. At the end of the first week, Morden had cut down enough trees. He and some of the others who had been unable to resist his intentions lashed them together with more of the vines until they had built a makeshift raft. When the raft was complete, he and six of his fellows carried it to the surf. Morden spoke coldly to the remaining boys.

"STAY HERE," he shouted, spitting on the sand. "STAY HERE AND SCRAMBLE FOR SNAILS IF YOU WANT. FREEZE TO DEATH OR STARVE, LEAVING ONLY STIFF CORPSES FOR YOUR FATHERS TO FIND AT MONTH'S END. NOT I! I CHOOSE ESCAPE!"

Three days later, Morden and two others stood on the icy shores of Vikavia shaking early winter ice from their shoulders and staring at the green wall of a great forest that rose from the beach. Their raft lay shattered in the surf and their lost companions went un-mourned. It is the way of the Vikavian to trust Nyror's will in such things. Half starved, wild with thirst and more dangerous than wolves; the boys entered the forest.

Within the hour, Morden crouched at the forest's edge and peered through a spread tangle of thorn and vine at the small farmyard before him. Gawky chickens pecked at the dirt near a thatch-roofed barn. Behind the barn, smoke wafting from the stone chimney of a small house was the only telltale sign of life. The farm seemed otherwise deserted.

Morden watched the chickens, paying close attention when one wandered close to the forest's edge. As a fat hen wobbled near, he tensed his muscles for a leap, keeping his gaze fixed on his intended, feathered dinner. The bird took three more clucking steps and Morden sprang. He cried out in victory

"I HAVE YOU NOW!" He cried, working his fingers desperately to hold onto the struggling chicken. A second later, a scream from the barn to his left made him raise his head and stare in shock at the small figure standing there.
"WHO!?"

Morden's heart hammered, first in shocked surprise and then in excitement as his eyes took in the image of the girl. She was blonde, with her hair long and loose in the back and thick braids framing her face. She wore a simple, flaxen dress and boots of soft sealskin. Her hands were up at her mouth, stifling further outcry and a woven reed basket of corn lay spilled on the earth at her feet. Her blue eyes were huge, bulging with fear and astonishment and at that moment, despite his wild hunger-despite the cold and fatigue of his insane flight from the Proving Isle-Morden froze, fixed by their stare.

The spell young Brynna cast over Morden broke seconds later when the hurtling, shouting form of her older brother came roaring at him from the barn, waving a club. The wooden bludgeon fell harshly across Morden's shoulder, causing him to lose his grip on the struggling chicken and raise his arms to shield his head. The larger boy raised the club for a second blow, but was stopped as his sister, clutching wildly, snatched his elbow and stayed his hand.
"BORI, NO!"
"BRYNNA! LET ME GO!" her brother roared.

The scant pause in brutality was all Morden needed. He sprang to his feet and sprinted to the tree line. A final leap into the bushes and he was gone, leaving an angry Bori and a relieved Brynna to stare into the leafy expanse after him. Morden ran until he felt he'd put a safe distance between himself and the farm and then stopped to look back. All he could see was the wall of forest, but the image of the young girl's face burned in his mind. His heart still hammered, both with the thrill of the encounter and with the pulse of something far deeper. As he returned to his friends, a single word rode his lips.
"BRYNNA..."

The boys camped close to the farm that night and Morden watched the barnyard and house, craving another glimpse of the girl that filled his memory. The farm barely stirred. Only the occasional sight of Bori, armed with his club and a small lantern as he patrolled the forest's edge, signaled any activity. Finally, even that ended and the candlelight from the small house winked out. With the icy chill of darkness blanketing him, Morden slept.

He awakened a short time later, startled by the crackle of a twig broken underfoot. He leaped to his feet and squinted through the gloom. His gaze found no immediate danger, but he breathed shallowly and watched the light of a small lantern bob and move toward him through the trees. He crouched, suspecting Bori of a sneak attack. Silently, he watched, letting the lantern come closer.
"HELLO?" a voice whispered, emanating from behind the lantern. "PLEASE, I MEAN NO HARM. I'VE BROUGHT FOOD."

Morden's heart leaped in his chest! The voice was feminine. This wasn't Bori, with his bruising club. It was Brynna!

Morden rose from the bushes. Brynna, startled by his sudden appearance, swung the lantern toward him. When the glow of its stubby candle found him, bathing his features in flickering light, she exhaled in relief. Morden stepped closer and the girl's hands came up, pushing a bundle toward him.

"YOU...YOU LOOKED HUNGRY." Brynna whispered fearfully.

"AND A BIT MAD?" Morden smiled back.

"YES...A BIT."

Brynna watched him timidly as he took the bundle from her and opened it. Inside were flint and steel for fire making, a long dagger, two loaves of brown bread and a small wheel of cheese. Morden eyed the items like lost treasure in the lamp light and his mouth drooled at the sight of the food.

"YOUR FATHER..." Morden quavered, raising his gaze to meet hers. "HE'LL GIVE YOU THE STRAP FOR THIS WHEN HE FINDS THESE THINGS MISSING."

"IT'S LIKELY," Brynna replied, smiling bravely. "BUT HE IS WEAK WHEN IT COMES TO THE WHIM OF HIS ONLY DAUGHTER. HE WON'T WIELD THE STRAP WITH MUCH STRENGTH."

"YOU HAVE COURAGE."

"NOT SO MUCH AS YOU, ALONE IN THE WOODS LIKE THIS! WINTER THREATENS, AND A WHEEL OF CHEESE AND A DAGGER WON'T..."

"WE'VE ESCAPED THE PROVING ISLE, MY LADS AND ME. WE RETURN TO OUR VILLAGE TO BECOME MEN."

"MEN..." Brynna giggled. "I'M NOT THE ONLY ONE IN DANGER OF THE STRAP THEN."

"I FEAR NOTHING." Morden replied boldly.

"WE SHALL SEE," she answered, lowering her head to look at him doubtfully.

"WHAT IS YOUR NAME?"

"I AM MORDEN, ELDEST SON OF THAYDON, OF THE SEA-WOLF CLAN."

"WELL THEN, MORDEN..." Brynna smiled, her eyes rising from his face to his hair. "RED MORDEN OF THE SEA-WOLF CLAN...YOU ARE ADDRESSING BRYNNA, ONLY DAUGHTER OF BRONN OF THE HAWKS. REMEMBER ME IF YOU SURVIVE YOUR FATHER'S WRATH."

"HA!" Morden laughed, striking his chest with a fist. "I TOLD YOU, I FEAR..."

"BRYNNA!" the shout was deep and angry and came from the direction of the farm. It was accompanied by the loud, frenzied barking of a dog. Morden started, hopping back into the bushes as Brynna turned toward the voice from the darkness.

Hurriedly, she moved toward his hiding place, holding something out to him with her hand. He reached for it nervously, taking the thing from her and holding it up to the weak light from her lamp. His hand shone like gold in the candlelight, filled with a thick lock of blonde hair. The gold disappeared as Brynna turned, carrying the lantern toward the woods' edge, making her way back toward the farm and leaving him in darkness.

"WAIT!" Morden cried.

"I MUST GO. MY FATHER'S PATIENCE ONLY GOES SO FAR," she replied. Her voice trailed back to him muffled. She hadn't turned and still faced the farm. "REMEMBER ME, RED MORDEN."

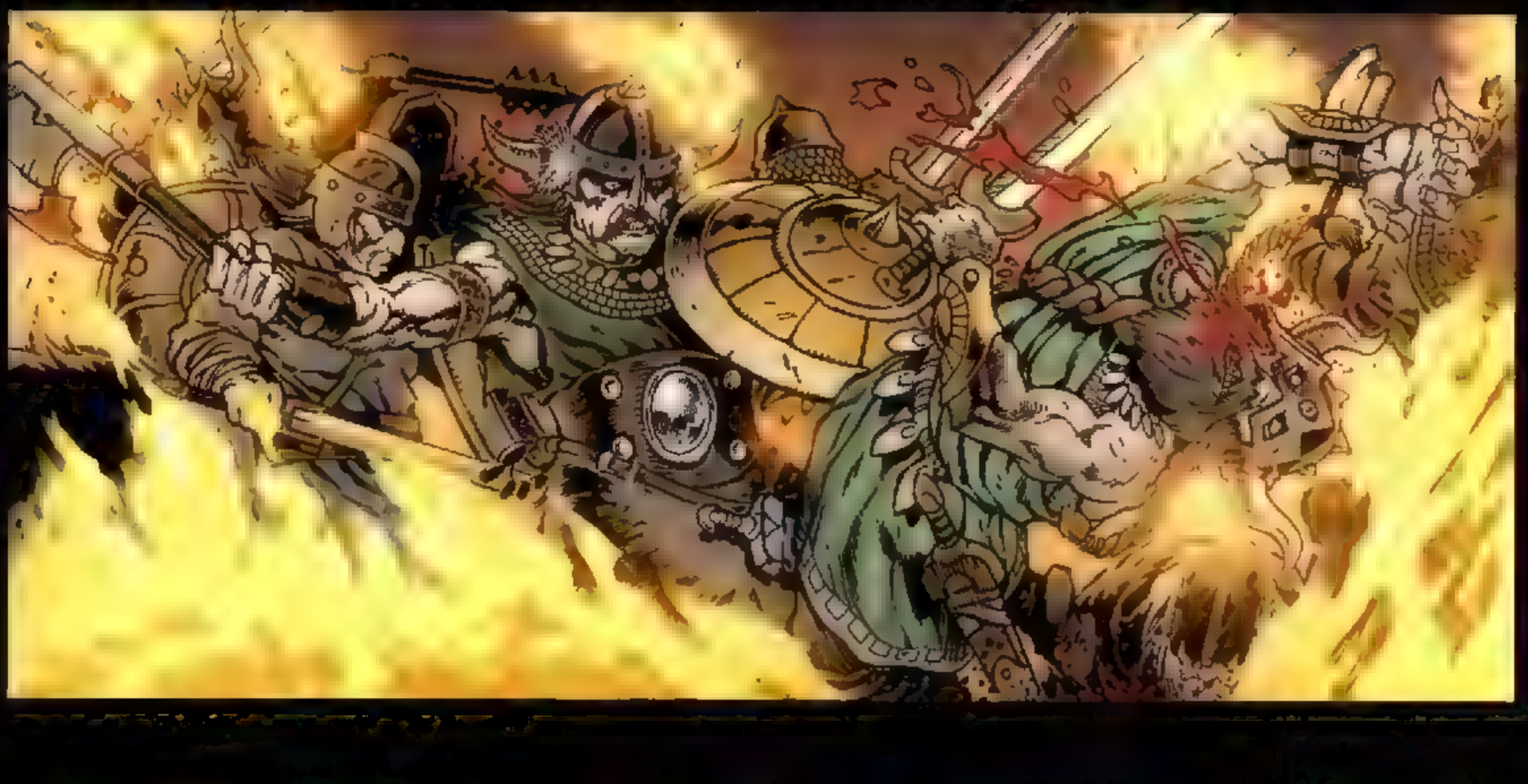
Morden watched her go, turning back toward his sleeping fellows only when the shining point of lantern light disappeared into the farmhouse. He smiled in the darkness as he fingered the lock of hair in his other hand, remembering the golden haired girl who had saved him. He would also remember the new name she had given him...and he would share it with the world.

The boys' journey home was swift. With food in their bellies and fire to stave off the cold, it took them little time to reach the village of the Sea-Wolves. True to Brynna's prophecy, they were each treated to harsh beatings for their brash escape from the Proving Isle, but secretly, their fathers boasted of their spirit and ingenuity, glowing with pride at each re-telling of the tale. They won freedom for their stranded fellows as well; with a long ship bringing five scrawny boys home a week later. The sixth was wrapped in funereal furs and given to his parents for burial on the high plains.

The following spring, when the dragon-prowed ships of the Sea-Wolves set sail beneath their red-striped sheets, Morden and the others stood on the decks. Armored and armed for the first time with the weapons of men, they faced the horizon and their destinies as the salt wind beckoned them to their first raiding season.

'Twas a summer of fury. Enemy villages were burned. Fat merchant ships were plundered and treasures of gold, silver and steel filled the holds to their brims. Seasoned reavers of the sea fought shoulder to shoulder with the newly recognized survivors of the Proving Isle, combining to form an unstoppable force of roaring, slashing steel. Morden came away fully blooded, proving himself in raid after raid and felling mortal enemies at a rate un-matched among members of his crew. In that first red season, he began a body count that would grow to un-countable proportions. The voyages of that summer also saw his claiming of the famous winged helm. When first he raised it to his head, all aboard the dragon-ship agreed that they'd witnessed something special. The birth of a legend.

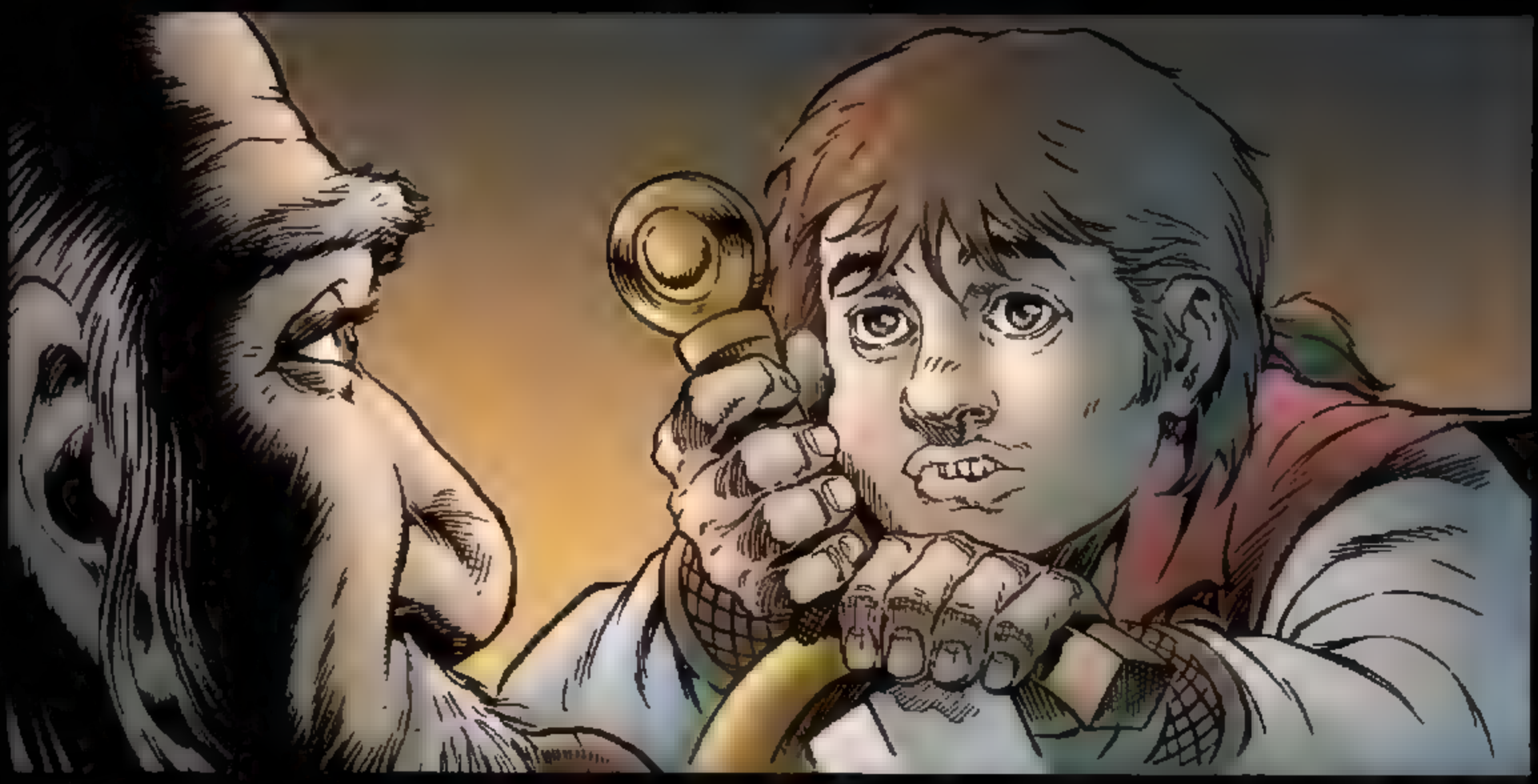
When the fall snows flew with the winds, the ships of the Wolves headed for home shores. Morden rode the decks of his father's vessel, staring across the ocean with his red hair flowing to match the undulating feathers of his helm. Jallak-one of the two lads who'd ridden the raft to freedom with Morden-stood at his side. Boys had become true men, men had become warriors and lifelong bonds of battle had been forged.



On the first day of the second month of winter, Bronn of the Hawk clan answered a stout knock at the door of his farmhouse, opening the heavy door to find the smiling form of Red Morden standing at his threshold. The youth grinned widely, holding up two dead chickens in his right hand and a bulging bag of silver and gold trinkets in his left. The chickens were a jest but Bronn quickly agreed to the handsome bride price offered in the treasure sack. He accepted his new son in law robustly, even laughing in the barnyard as he watched his son Bori-who had protested the marriage loudly-take the beating of his life with his own club at Morden's hands.

Morden and Brynna were married in the spring, high atop the cliffs near the village of the Sea-Wolves. The marriage sealed peace between their clans and began a time of prosperity and brotherhood along the northern coast of Vikavia.

On their wedding night, Brynna astonished Morden, showing him a drawing she'd made months earlier, during the summer. The image showed the young reaver himself, grinning beneath his winged helm, holding up a pair of chickens and a bag of gold. Morden looked at his new bride's azure eyes again, as if for the first time as he realized that she possessed not only normal sight, but vision beyond mortal ken. It wasn't until she allowed the shoulders of her bridal gown to slide to her waist that he managed to tear his eyes from hers.



The following spring, Brynna gave Morden a son. He held the tiny bundle in awe as he paused in his labors to build their home. Brynna kissed her savage husband warmly and promised him four more.

"FOUR MORE?" Finn interrupted. "BUT YOU SAID THAT THE DRAGON-BEAST SLEW ONLY FOUR OF MORDEN'S CHILDREN!"

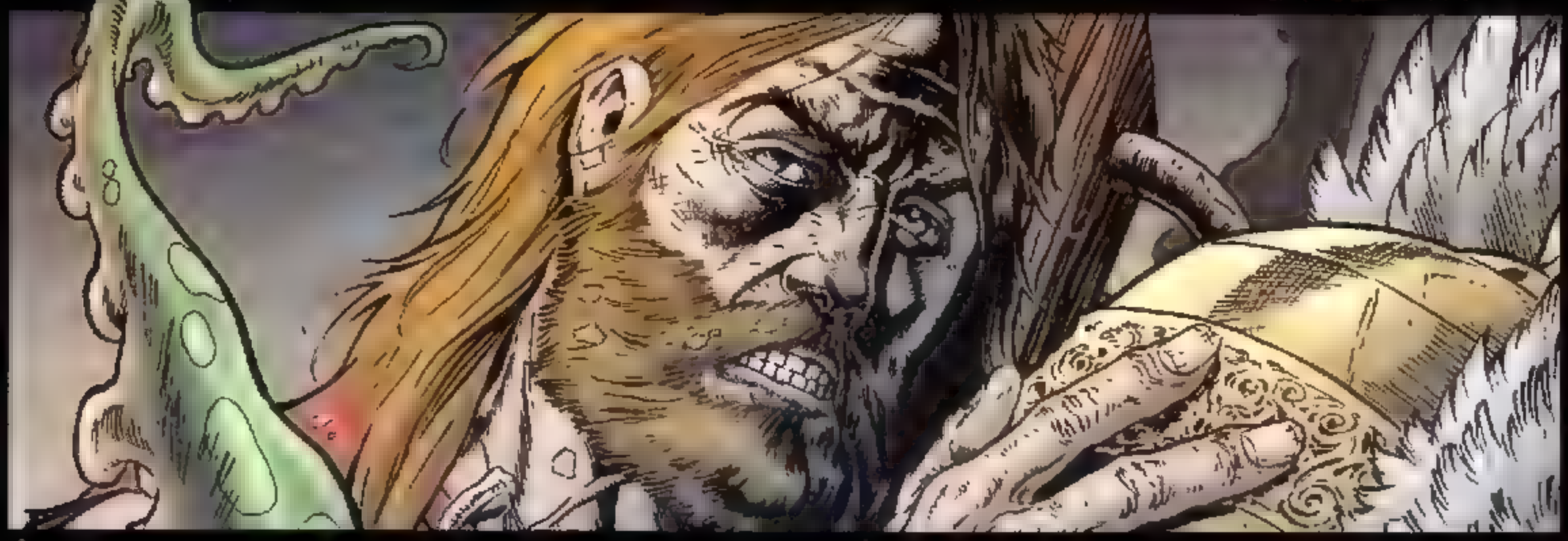
"SO I DID, FINN," Ghurrd agreed, wagging a finger at the boy's impatience. "BUT THEN, YOU'VE NOT HEARD THE WHOLE TALE, HAVE YOU? DON'T BE TOO HARD ON YOURSELF BOY. MORDEN HIMSELF WARRED WITH THE MEMORY AS HE REACHED THAT POINT IN THE TALE."

"FIVE CHILDREN?" Morden mumbled to himself, his breath a frozen cloud billowing from between his lips. "WHY DID SHE PROMISE ME FIVE CHILDREN WHEN SHE BIRTHED ONLY FOUR? SHE HAD NEVER BEEN WRONG ABOUT THE FUTURE...NEVER! HOW COULD SHE...?"

A sudden slithering sound from the side of the boat stopped Morden's words. Questions faded in his mind as he turned his head to the left, following movement half-detected by his peripheral vision. His eyes widened and his near-frozen skin crawled as he watched six dripping tentacles loop and slide over the iced rail, stretching and reaching blindly for anything solid in their path. The slimy coils collided with the severed head of the Lost One and encircled it, squeezing and prying at the thing, trying to pull it from the boat's deck.

"NYROR'S BEARD!" Morden shouted, throwing the stiff casing of frozen furs aside and rising with axe in hand. "WHIP-FIN!"

The Reaver raced to the side rail as the frozen head was pulled free of its icy moorings. He raised his axe and stared in horror at the thrashing thing that broke the surface of the sea below. The beast was huge and shark-like, with sickly, mottled yellow-gray skin, four black eyes and the gaping, toothsome maw of an eel. Ringing its head were six sinuous tentacles. The tentacles lashed and swung, bringing its gruesome prize to the savage, snapping mouth. The disembodied head of the Lost One flew from the suction cups on the underside of the waving members and disappeared into the gnashing cavity. The teeth came down in multiple, grinding rows, shredding scaled flesh and frozen bone in an instant. Emptied now, the dripping armada of thrashing arms flew toward Morden, guided by dim vision from a double row of eyes.



"NO!" Morden screamed, bringing the axe down, trapping one wriggling tentacle between the weapon's edge and the rail. The ropy appendage parted, sending a stream of pale yellow ichor flying from its stump as the twitching, severed end of the thing dropped stiffly into the sea. He rose from his swing, bringing his hand up and back for another blow when the icy, slimed length of a second tentacle found his wrist. It wrapped the Reaver's muscular forearm and yanked madly, disabling his weapon and pulling him flush with the rail. Another sinewy loop encircled his neck and yet another lashed around his waist. Morden tried to shout, tried to curse the thing...but his breath had been stolen.

Morden dropped the axe, his panicked fingers coming at once to his throat to pry and claw at the suffocating tentacles. He flexed the muscles of his neck, fighting the lethal constriction, trying desperately to inhale. He struggled madly, thrashing and kicking as he felt himself being lifted from the deck. Through the dancing white lights and pulsing gray spots that blurred his vision, he could see the sucking, toothsome mouth that awaited him below. His own mouth opened in another silent scream and his numb fingers fell away from his trapped throat as his vision went black.

A hideous, animal shriek tore the night air as the slippery coils suddenly loosened from Morden's neck, arm and waist. He sucked hungrily at sudden, miraculous oxygen, feeling its razored passage in his throat and forcing it deep into his tortured lungs. The tentacles released him completely and he felt gravity take him, lulling him for an instant in a weightless, dark void before slamming him back into the boat. Coughing and wheezing, Morden rubbed at the diamonds in his eyes and rose trembling from the frozen deck.

Staggering to the rail, he cast his gaze toward the Whip-fin. The creature was still screaming, its high-pitched wail blending the plaintive cry of an unfed babe with the banshee shriek of a panther. The monstrous fish thrashed madly, spiked mouth spasming, tentacles slicing the air in mindless seizures of pain. Around it, a growing pool of sickly yellow stained the waves. The Whip-fin rose from the water, reaching high into the night with its writhing arms as if seeking something to lash itself to...something to give it the leverage to pull itself free from whatever was spilling its lifeblood into the sea.

The Whip-fin wailed again. This time, the horrible cry was cut short, strangled to a dying gurgle followed by a thunderous splash as the fish disappeared, tentacles and all, into the boiling froth.

Morden stared, eyes bulging in confusion, body quaking with the dying tremors of horror and the growing chill of the Brumal night. He knelt, reaching blindly for the haft of his battle-axe, refusing to take his eyes from the calming surface of the water where the Whip-fin had vanished. His fingers found steel and he brought the axe to his side, casting about with his nervous gaze. He searched the surface of the sea for sign of a new threat-a second predator, larger, something capable of taming the tentacled horror that had so nearly claimed him as its bloody feast.

Long, frozen moments passed and Morden's breath eased in his chest. Naught but the moan of the night winds met his ears and his eyes found nothing but the choppy dance of the waves. The ocean's surface stared back, dark and endless, save for the single, round disc of the reflected winter moon. Morden gasped, raising his gaze from water to sky. No moon broke the iron cloud cover of the coming storm above. No star shine penetrated the canopy either-the sky was as black as a shroud. Morden took an uneasy step back from the rail and fixed his gaze on the glowing circle in the sea as it grew, glowing brighter, larger. He brought a shuddering hand upwards to shield his eyes as the radiance grew. Stark, blinding white light spread beneath the surface of the sea, engulfing the Red Reaver and his small boat as the thing that wasn't the moon rose from the depths.

"WHAT WAS IT, GRANDFATHER!?" Finn asked, breathless. "HOW CAN THE MOON RISE FROM THE SEA?"

"I JUST TOLD YOU YOUNG FINN," Ghurrd answered, leaning closer and spreading his fingers before the frightened boy's eyes. "IT WAS NO MOON. IT WAS..."

"LEVIATHAN!" Morden hissed, recoiling as the sea erupted scant yards from the rail of his boat. The berserker ducked, gripping the gunwale as a wave of freezing brine shot up from the surface, dousing him and threatening to swamp the small craft. Morden coughed, spitting to clear his mouth of the withering salt, wiping his eyes to clear his sight yet again. When he could see, he leapt to the rail and stared in wonder at the scaled thing that filled the night.

The beast was enormous-larger than a horned whale. Its flesh was a pale, pinkish-white and huge, unblinking red eyes flanked its head. Atop its crown, a muscular, veined spine reached high into the night, bearing a round, glowing orb of pure, white light. Bathed in that unnatural glow, the leviathan floated atop the waves, barely disturbing the water's surface as it plowed slowly with its giant fins, keeping itself stationary before the boat.

"COME AHEAD THEN, MONSTER!" Morden screamed. "COME END ME AND BE DAMNED! WHAT ELSE CAN THIS WRETCHED OCEAN HURL AT ME!?"

The Reaver watched in breathless awe as the great beast opened its cavernous mouth, exposing row upon row of tall, spiny, teeth. From behind these savage fangs, a great, pale tongue unfurled, rolling forward like a vast carpet. And upon this carpet, moving with a flowing grace that bespoke a stroll across silk, came the pale figure of a woman.

"HAVE YOU NO WORDS, BARBARIAN?" the woman said. Her voice was like a whisper, but it echoed in Morden's head like the thunder of white-capped swells. "NO MORE OATHS TO DEAF GODS OR CURSES WITH WHICH TO FOUL YOUR TONGUE?"

"BY THE NINE HELLS..." Morden cursed.

"AH, SO YOU CAN SPEAK. I FEARED THAT THE COLD BEAUTY OF CARCERA, THE SEA WITCH HAD STOPPED YOUR HAMMERING HEART."

The woman was indeed beautiful. Her eyes shown like black pearls from a perfect face framed by a mane of ebony hair shot with deepest blue. Her skin, like precious mother-of-pearl, glowed with supernatural iridescence and glistened with the tiniest hint of Piscean scale. Her lips, full and colored a menacing red-black, curled in an inviting yet frightening grin. Her figure was full, voluptuous, held in check only by the scantest of garments. Breastplates of delicate, woven coral covered her chest, while a gauzy, diaphanous shift supported by a girdle of conch fell from her waist to her calves. ***Carcera***, a sorceress of the deeps, second only to the great Nyror in magicks of the sea, stood basking in the ice winds of the Brumal sea in the mouth of a monster-the very picture of cold, lethal desire.

"SEA-WITCH..." Morden stammered, unable to take his eyes off the woman across the waves. "I HAVE HEARD TALES OF YOUR KIND..."

"OF COURSE YOU HAVE, RED MORDEN. YOUR LIFE IS AWASH WITH LEGENDS AND WHISPERED MYTHS OF WE WHO SWIM THE VASTNESS."

"W-WHAT DO YOU WANT OF ME, WOMAN?" Morden trembled, unsure of his words.

"WHY, TO SPARE YOUR LIFE, OF COURSE," Carcera answered, fingering her dark locks and smiling wantonly. "I WOULD HAVE THOUGHT THAT TO BE PAINFULLY OBVIOUS, EVEN TO A MINDLESS MAN-SLAYER."

"WHY I SPARE ME?" Morden shouted, anger tinting his voice now. "THE SAGAS SPEAK OF THOUSANDS LED TO A WATERY GRAVE BY YOUR HAND!"

"HA! SELFLESSNESS DOES NOT BECOME YOU, CRIMSON REAVER! REST YOUR MIND AND KNOW THAT IT IS NOT YOU OR YOUR LIFE THAT INTERESTS ME."

The sea witch raised her lithe, white arms. Her hair rose on sudden winds and her long, transparent skirt whipped and danced across her thighs. At her feet, beyond the jaws of the leviathan, the waves rose and swelled at the beckoning of their mistress, reaching skyward with sharp, foaming points.

"IT IS YOUR QUEST THAT SUMMONS ME, LITTLE MAN!"

"MY QUEST?" Morden stammered. "BUT WHAT COULD YOU KNOW OF..?"

"THE OCEANS KNOW, RED MORDEN. THE WATERS HEAR...THEY SEE...THEY WHISPER THEIR SECRETS IN THE DEPTHS AND WISE ARE THOSE WHO PAY HEED. NOW YOU LISTEN, SAVAGE ONE. YOU OWE ME YOUR LIFE THIS NIGHT AND I WOULD SEE THE DEBT REPAID."

"I OWE YOU NOTHING!" Morden shouted, shaking his axe toward the statuesque figure before him. His rage had risen, encompassing and diminishing his fear, and now he hurled his words at the sea witch, oblivious to her power. "DROWN ME AND HAVE DONE WITH IT, SORCERESS. I'LL NOT BE YOUR DAMNED LAP-DOG!"

"SILENCE!" the witch shrieked. Her voice roared like a typhoon, her eyes glowed like blue lightning and her hair rose like a static crown in an ebon halo around her head. "I ASK NOTHING OF YOU SAVE THE COMPLETION OF YOUR QUEST!

Carcera's fury disappeared as suddenly as it had risen. The sea calmed and the winds died to a gentle breeze as her voice returned to its former seductive whisper. "You see, something has gone missing from the world. Something dark and wondrous in its power. As a creature fed by the dwindling magicks of this world of Agadah, I would see it restored."

Before Morden could respond, the grinning witch rose on her toes and spun like a dervish. Her dark hair and swirling clothes spun and flew as she blurred, spinning faster and faster. At her feet, the surface of the sea began to swirl and twist, mimicking her motion. As she increased her speed, so too did the spinning water. In seconds, the ocean rose, spreading from a pinpoint base to a wide funnel. Morden cringed, shielding his eyes again as beads of brine stung his face and chest. He clung to the boat's rail, fighting the rising wind as a great waterspout rose from the depths. Above its roar, the sea witch's voice could be heard as she spoke her last words. "THAT OF WHICH I SPEAK IS AT THE HEART OF YOUR SEARCH, RED MORDEN! SWAY OVER DEATH IS BUT THE BASEST OF ITS POWERS!"

Morden felt the boat move forward. In a fever, he pushed past the wind and cast a glance over the side, toward the water below. The vortex had spread, encompassing the small craft, drawing it closer to the spinning waterspout. Morden shouted, voicing his rage and surprise, but his words were lost to the winds. As the little boat surged, rose and was finally absorbed by the whirling tube of water, the only voice heard above the din was Carcera's.

"BUT BEWARE, O' MAN...FOR FORCES GREATER AND DARKER THAN MINE SHALL SEEK TO BAR YOUR WAY!"

"WOULDN'T MORDEN DROWN INSIDE THAT THING?" Finn asked, hands fidgeting with apprehension.

"NOT WITH THE SEA WITCH'S MAGICKS KEEPING BREATH IN HIM, BOY. TERRIBLE

WAS HER POWER, TERRIBLE AND VAST. IN FACT, SO GREAT WAS HER MAGICK, THAT SHE LENT MORDEN VISIONS INSIDE THE WATERSPOUT. VISIONS FORETELLING GRIM THINGS TO COME." Ghurrd answered.

Carcera's face formed from the spinning, gyrating wall of water inside the spout. Swirling foam took the shape of her hair, eyes and mouth as her voice continued to shriek over the roar of the flume.

"GRIM THINGS, RED MORDEN! THINGS...UNIMAGINABLE..." The water swirled, blanked the sea witch's image, then rose and reformed. The new shape showed a twisting, writhing snarl of dark, thorned vines.

"THINGS..." the voice continued. "UNSTOPPABLE." Again, the waters cleared, then twisted and whirled into a form of otherworldly horror. Before Morden's horror-stricken eyes rose a helmeted vision of violence and bloodshed.

The featureless face stared from deep shadow and its eyes seemed to glow with red balefire. The helmet was gray, pointed and flanked on either side by down-turned horns. It was a visage borne by legends from many a hopeless battlefield, legends that spoke a name in whispers of awe and dread. Morden echoed them silently, his mouth forming the words, the waterspout swallowing the sound.

"DEATH DEALER."

"NOT HIM..." Finn moaned, his voice tinged with hopeless dread, his eyes falling to the glowing hearth. "HE...IS SAGA'S END."

"TAKE HEART GRANDSON," Ghurrd soothed, patting Finn's wrist softly. "IF RED MORDEN COULD FACE THE IMAGE OF THE HORNED SLAYER, SO CAN YOU."

"BUT GRANDFATHER..."

"WHY DO YOU THINK WE ONLY TELL THIS SAGA IN WHISPERS?" Ghurrd interrupted, raising a finger to his lips. "NOW, LET ME TELL YOU WHERE MORDEN ENDED UP, TRAVELING IN CARCERA'S GRIP WITH ONLY THE ROAR OF THE SPOUT AND HER MANIAC'S LAUGHTER RINGING IN HIS EARS."

When next the sun rose, it cast its hot rays earthward, bathing the sand of a lost beach in morning warmth and blinding glow. The beach surrounded a dense, jungle island hidden from the vastness of the frozen Brumal Sea by the great, spiked Fangs of Dyrrge. Within the protective reefs, the weather had been given its own tropical sway, touched by the dark hand of magick. The island lay as an oasis of green life in the midst of a frozen wasteland. One could stand on the sand of that beach and stare out, past the spines of dark coral and rock...and peer into an icy hell.

On this beach lay the limp body of Red Morden, the Crimson Reaver...scourge of the Brumal Sea. About him lay the dashed remains of his small boat, shredded bits of his sail and snarled loops of rigging laced with seaweed.

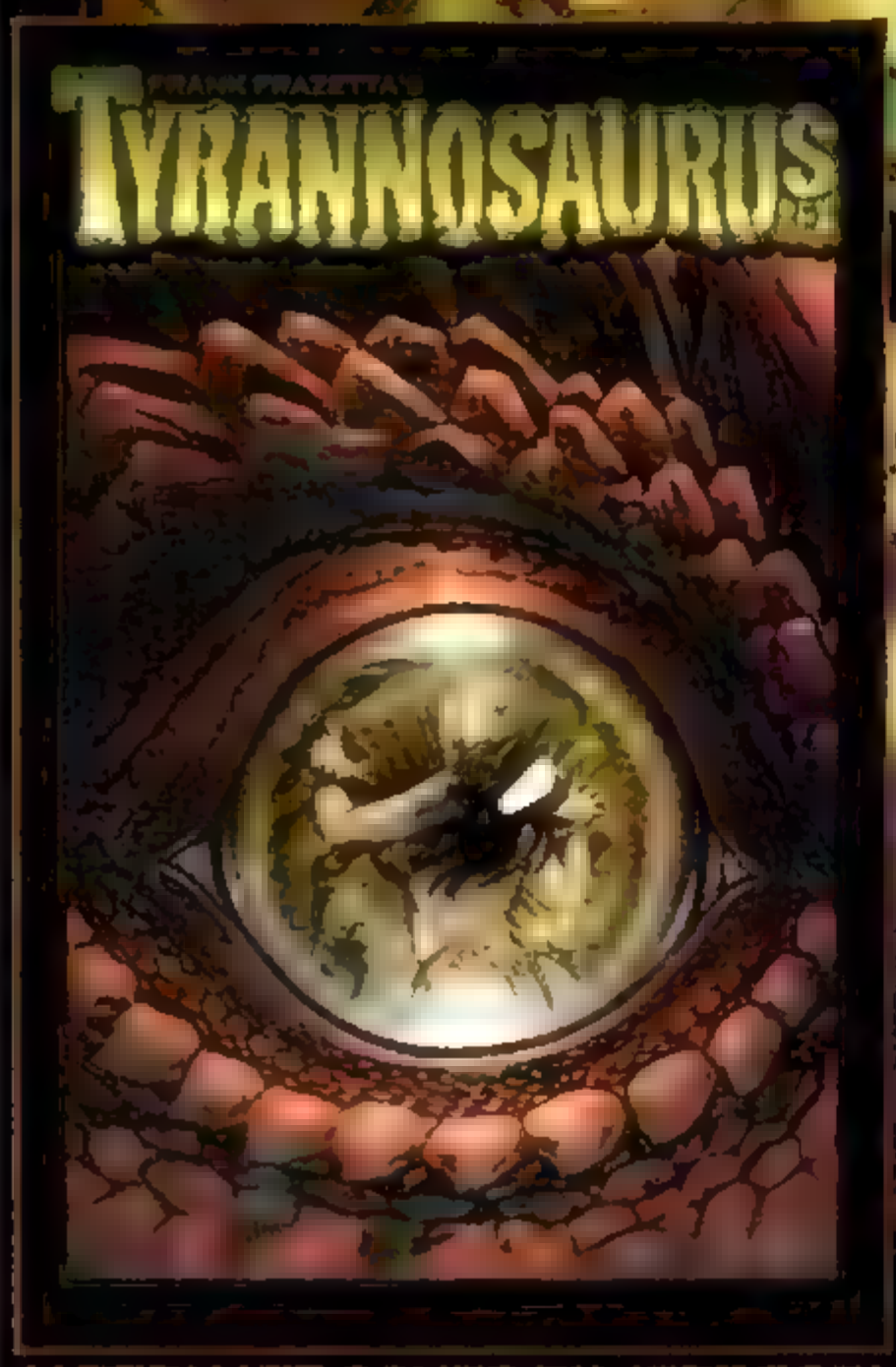
Above him, looming over the sand and casting a long, black shadow toward the sea, was the silent, iron form of a sea-demon. Crouched on a pedestal of twisting, thorny vine, the leering, evil statue was cast in the likeness of a great merman, holding twin tridents in its fisted, webbed hands and staring downward from under hooded brows. And it's head-the bulbous, oval likeness of a giant octopus, with black tentacles coiling over a kraken's sharp beak-spoke silently, wordlessly...of nightmares to come.

"WHERE WAS HE, GRANDFATHER?" Finn asked excitedly, former dread replaced by renewed interest in his voice.
"WHERE?" Ghurrd asked slyly, frowning with mock intensity at the boy.
"WHY, THE NEXT STEP ON HIS DREAD JOURNEY, THAT'S WHERE."
"BUT WHERE WAS THAT!?"
"RED MORDEN HAD COME... TO THE ISLE OF THORNS!"

FRANK FRAZETTA'S

# TYRANNOSAURUS REX™

MARK KIDWELL
JEFF ZORNOW
2010

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AMID THE ICY WASTES OF THE BRUMAL SEA, RED MORDEN AWAKENS ON THE HOT SANDS OF A TROPICAL OASIS IN THE SHADOW OF A MONSTER. A MONSTER BORN OF BLACK MAGIC AND THE TWISTING, TANGLED WALL OF EVIL THAT LIES DEEP IN THE ISLAND'S JUNGLE. THERE, IN THE HEART OF A GROWING DARKNESS, MORDEN WILL PIT HIS COURAGE AND HIS AXE AGAINST BEASTS THAT WALK AS MEN, POWER MAD WIZARDS TWISTED BY SORCERY AND THE MURDEROUS, INTOXICATING SINGING OF THE VINES. FOLLOWING HIS QUEST FOR A MYSTERIOUS TALISMAN THAT WILL SAVE HIS SOUL, RED MORDEN HAS COME...TO THE ISLE OF THORNS!

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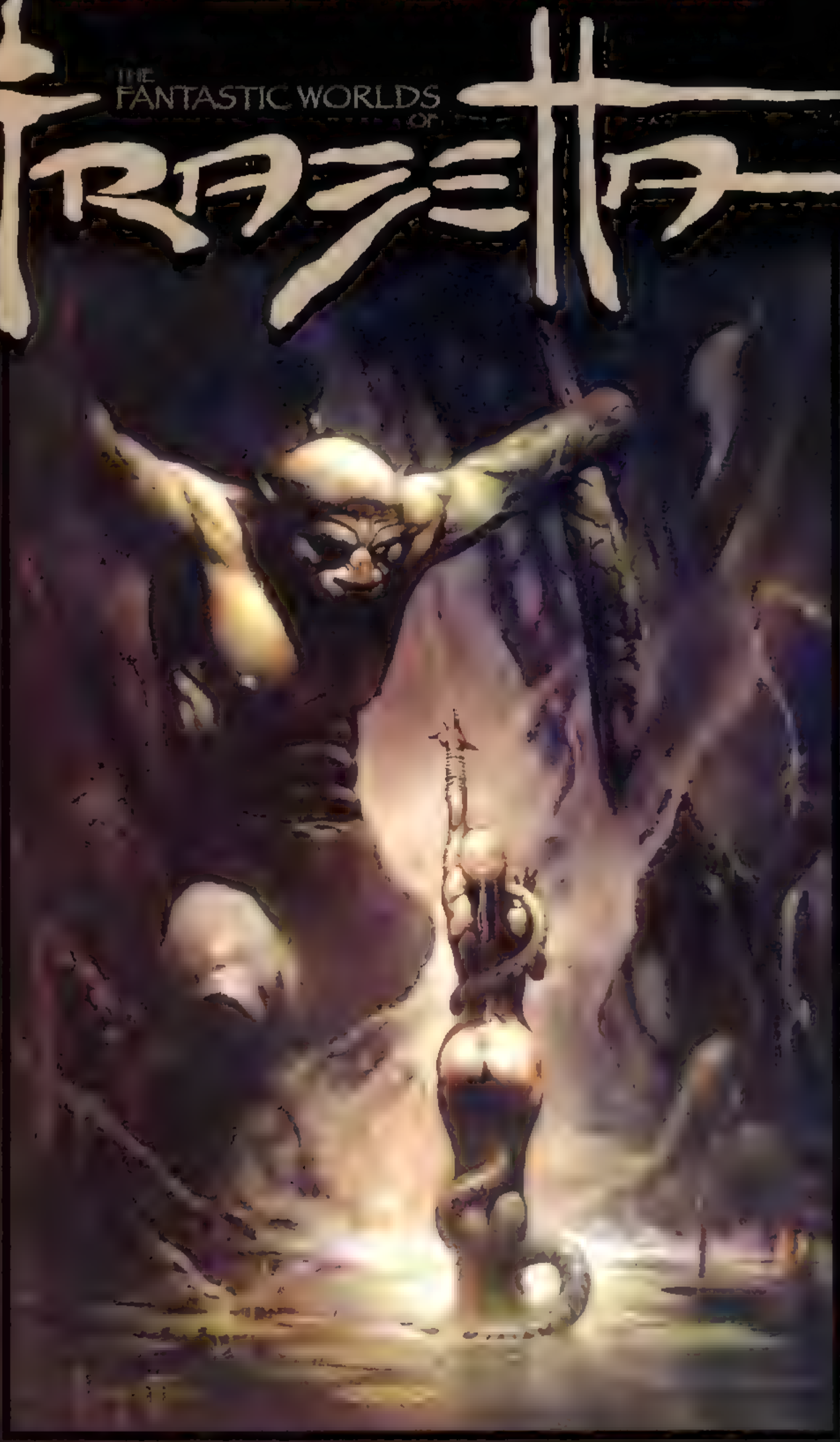

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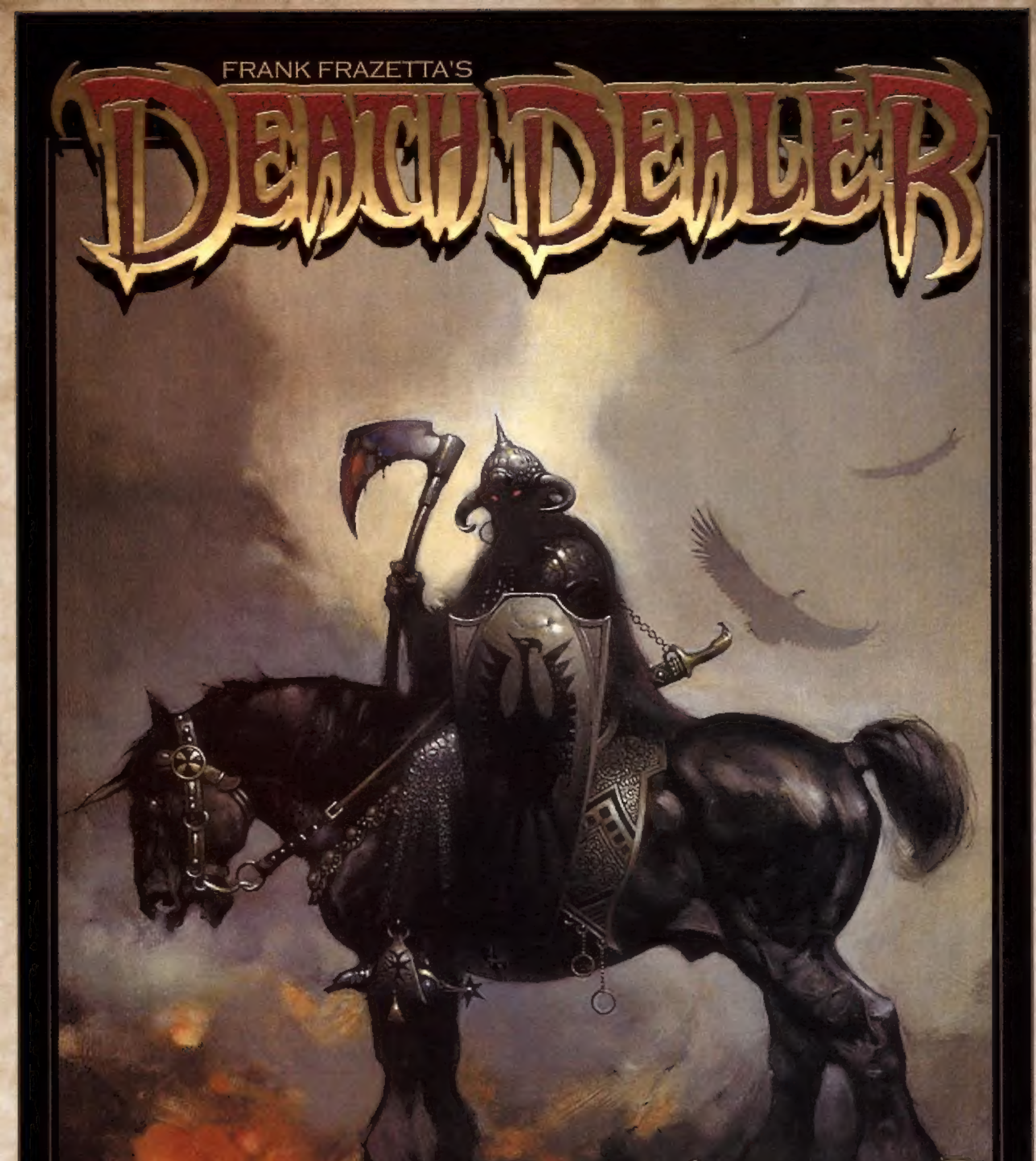

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